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Symbolic Sustainability
A concept beyond aesthetics and materialism

Dr. Fabiano Fazion, Architect[1]

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.
The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.
Oscar Wilde

1. Introduction

The 20th century represents, for Architecture, a level of conceptual and aesthetic decay among the lowest ever achieved in the long history of human buildings. This is because the so-called Modern Architecture succeeded to establish a rupture with traditional knowledges and forms, in order to promote a vision of the future in everything linked to the supposedly utopian ideals of revolutionary political currents: 'start everything from scratch' was a Bauhaus motto.

The penetration of Modernist thought was so intense and wide that, yet in the second half of the 20th century, even some works that were called 'post' or even 'against' modernist ideals were nothing more than attempts of revisionism or adaptation, incorporating some of the criticis but, essentially, repeating and valuing the principles of that movement[2], sometimes reaching the verge of veneration. Although since the 1960s some authors (MUMFORD, 1961) have already expressed (mainly aesthetic) criticisms of Modernism, it is only in recent times that a more consistent reaction to this phenomenon began to be outlined[3], with authors such as Salíngaros (2008), who becomes the basis of an entire anti-modernist movement.

However, there is still a difficulty in criticizing Modernism, due not only to the dominant interpretative pattern (TOURAINE, 2009), which imposes a culturalist relativism, but also due to the lack of an agglutinating concept, which bases could be not principles dependent on cultural standards (such as Aesthetics), nor related to materialistic and functionalist patterns of analysis (such as Ecology).

From this reflection the concept of Symbolic Sustainability is born, whose gestation we will present below. In order not to restrict ourselves to a purely theoretical, almost philosophical work, we will conclude with some proposals for

the practical application of the concept, with the intention of instigating the debate and the development of these ideas.

2 - Aesthetics and Ecology - conceptual and political ambiguities

Since the end of the 19th century, with the emergence of what became known as 'Modern Art', some questions related to Aesthetics, previously part of common sense and interpretive tradition, began to be put in check. Not only have blurred the barriers between what may or may not be considered 'beautiful', but artistic proposals have emerged that have deliberately disposed of the 'ugly' as a way to shock the public, to bring up certain questions and, also, to establish 'position-takings'[4] in the Field of Arts, Architecture, Music, etc.

This did not mean, of course, that the general public has ceased to have its independent aesthetic options, nor that the entire interpretative tradition has been abandoned, but, being the 'experts' of the different fields (artists, architects, musicians, etc.) the unique endowed with the cultural legitimacy to establish the doxa, and counting Modern Art with an intense symbolic work of building its own authority, the criteria, increasingly obscure, started to be ignored by the public that, throughout the decades, had its aesthetic judgment capacity first neglected and then overcome.

Architectural Brutalism, for example, distanced itself from the common aesthetic sense and used its forms to establish tension (visual, cognitive), not only not caring about looking 'ugly', but sometimes intending to deliberately use ugliness to create a shock or establish a position. In music, dodecaphonism and serialism, for example, purposefully distanced themselves from the established aesthetic tradition.

The process was so serious and profound that it led to reactions such as some works by Roger Scruton, aimed at recovering and revaluing aesthetic traditions, having the English philosopher produced with the BBC a documentary that became well known called 'Why beauty matters'. However, at a time when relativism started to impose itself as a standard on all cultural issues (at least in the West), aesthetic discussion remains hostage to cultural divisions, or, to put it another way, certain interpretative patterns are accepted within certain cultural groups, but other groups remain insensitive to or are

directly opposed to them. Scruton, in his documentary, preaches to converts, but there is no way to promote an understanding that goes beyond the 'tribal' divisions of the general public; if it is little affected, even less are intellectuals and artists focused on promoting ugliness.

Another conceptual element full of ambiguities, and which also serves as a symbolic tool in the struggles for positions in the Fields, is ‘sustainability’. Having its roots in Ecology, sustainability is commonly related to material aspects of reality. It is true that several intellectuals realize that sustainability is also related to cultural and psychological factors, but, given the abstract essence of these factors, it is difficult to define and evaluate precisely what *cultural sustainability* is, nor there are indications of how it is possible to apply this concept in the assessment of specific cases or in proposing actions or projects[5]. For this reason, a large part of the proposals for 'sustainable' or 'ecological' architecture or urbanism[6] are restricted to addressing material aspects of buildings or cities[7], or precipitate by cogitations distant of practice.[8]

More importantly, when considering the *form* factor, the discussion often doesn’t go beyond the discourse of the *doxa*, so remains the possibility of designing and constructing allegedly 'sustainable' buildings and cities following the canon of Modern Architecture, as if there were not enough evidence that the shape of the buildings is one of the determining factors for the well-being of users, and even for their health condition[9], and that Modern Architecture has inherent harmful characteristics[10]. In general, it is not possible to distinguish, *from the forms* used in projects considered sustainable, which forms would be more or less sustainable - the criteria are different. As Salíngaros points out,

> *In architecture, a theoretical framework ought to explain why buildings affect human beings in certain ways, and why some buildings are more successful than others, both in practical as well as in psychological and aesthetic terms*.’ (2008, p. 149).

Another problem in relation to studies that intend to include immaterial aspects (here the term 'symbolic' appears almost always) in the discussion on sustainability is intellectual affiliation. In most cases, the *symbolic* is dealt with from some main currents - isolated or in some combination: those of Pierce and Jung, with eventual references to Kant. However, although the value of these currents of thought is recognizable, they have in common the fact that they

assign a, say, *utility value* to symbolic elements, insofar as they establish an insurmountable link between the symbol and its meaning or its use. In this way, the symbol ends up reduced to what in it is rationalized (a posteriori), and, since the scholars does not have rational elements to explore the roots of the symbol beyond what emerges from it as a manifestation, remains what is *manifest* as the only recognized aspect.

However, the anthropological roots of symbolic phenomena remain relatively unexplored, but they, in fact, determine characteristics of symbols that, not only preceding but also being broader than reason, are inaccessible to simple rationalist analysis. In order to broaden the understanding of symbols, we use here two authors: first, Carlo Ginzburg (1989), who, with his proposition of an 'evidential paradigm', helps us to understand through 'signs' and 'clues', which allows us to do without 'direct evidence', so dear to rationalists but insufficient for the exploration of reality; second, Pierre Bourdieu (1989; 1996; 2001; 2007a; 2007b; 2010), with studies on the symbolic that can provide us different interpretative paths than those suggested by the symbolic analysts already mentioned.

As for Ginzburg, it will suffice here to say that he proposes an interpretation of the signs that goes beyond these, in the sense that they can carry meanings that are not exactly in them, but in their relations with the world and with other signs, which must be discovered by the observer, beyond what he can see. The observer's entire cognitive system must therefore be placed at the service of hermeneutics.

Bourdieu, in turn, offers us a possibility of interpretation that goes beyond the system of *meanings*, by establishing an understanding of the formation of symbolic systems and their economy (in the broad sense). According to him,

> […] the symbolic systems, which a group produces and reproduces within the scope of a specific type of social relations, acquire their true meaning when referring to the relations of power that make them possible and socially necessary […], that is, it is necessary to establish the conditions of production, reproduction and use of the thought schemes of which they are the product. (BOURDIEU, 2007b: 176)

In addition, the author also makes reference to the anthropological bases of symbols, pointing to social relations mediated by bodily characteristics, which not only precede but can be *opposed* to a merely cultural symbolic logic:

> [...] bodies would have every possibility of receiving a value strictly proportioned to the position of their possessors in the structure of the distribution of other fundamental properties if the autonomy of the logic of biological heredity in relation to the logic of social heredity did not sometimes attribute, at times, to the most deprived, under all other relationships, the rarest bodily properties, for example, beauty [...] and if, conversely, the accidents of biology did not at times deprive the 'great' of the bodily attributes of their position, such as corpulence or beauty. (BOURDIEU, 2007b: 183).

3 - A concept for epistemological and political action

It is from the confluence of these propositions that arises the idea of a unifying concept, which can incorporate anthropological roots, does not depend on the social relations inherent to Aesthetics, does not remain tied to the rationalist and materialist roots of thought and can serve to establish assessments of the ecological quality of environments: the 'Symbolic Sustainability'. This is not a simple proposal, and we will advance here only its general lines.

First, it will be necessary to understand what symbols are from this anthropological perspective: human cognition has its roots on a base on which the rational was still in formation, with Nature being the fertile ground of formation; symbolic systems began to form along with the rational, or, as Bourdieu points out, '*the very structures of the world are present in the structures (or rather, in the cognitive schemes) that agents use to understand it.*' (2001: 185). Therefore, the existence of symbols does not arise from a rational understanding, but from the apprehension of reality, which endows the symbols with meanings that, sometimes, exceed the descriptive or explanatory capacity of reason.

The fact that the sky is predominantly blue, the leaves are mostly green and the fire is reddish-orange is linked to what color psychology would come to formulate as its theories. But, while it is possible to construct rationalist explanations for this, 'cool' or 'warm' colors, for example, are not rational concepts; rather, they derive from reality and practical knowledge. In a way, and

to a certain extent, the effects of these colors can also be observed in other animal species, as it also happens in relation to sounds and other sensitive elements (KRAUSE, 2013). Likewise, everyone can recognize a romantic film, but rarely - except to shock or establish a contrast - it will be considered appropriate to link a dodecaphonic music track to a romantic story. If these relations were not self-evident and cross-cultural, it would not be possible to classify a film, *a priori*, as romantic, comedy or adventure[11].

Thus, the Symbolic has a broad meaning, which bases are in the confluence between the body and the meanings, between Nature and Culture. It means the set of cognitive dispositions (BOURDIEU, 2001, p. 27), influenced by historical-social conditions, which meanings are abstract, that is, they cannot be decoded nor they 'represent' something in a specific way, but they constitute ways of thinking, feeling and acting and which constitute 'symbolic systems' (BOURDIEU, 2007a, p. 176), since they are endowed with specific historicity and coherence.

> Symbolic force [...] constitutes a form of power that is exercised over bodies, directly, and as if by incantation, despite any physical constriction; [...] it derives its conditions of possibility [...] from the immense previous work [...] of operating a durable transformation of the bodies and producing the permanent dispositions awakened and reactivated by symbolic action. (This transformative action is all the more powerful when it is exercised, essentially, in an invisible and insidious way, through **familiarization with a symbolically structured physical world** [...]). (BOURDIEU, 2001, pp. 204-205 - emphasis added)

In human environment, the Symbolic is diffuse, and not only does the set of symbols make up a symbolic system, but, in fact, there are often two or more symbolic systems, established (voluntarily or not) by different social forces and from which these forces make use in symbolic disputes. Not being the symbolic forces given *a priori*, nor static, but resulting from historical conditions, there is a dynamic balance between the symbolic systems present in an environment. This balance is constantly reinforced by the dominant forces, but also tested, challenged, by the dominated forces, and, at times, overcome and restored on other bases. However, the world is not currently a chaos devoid of meaning and logic, or as Bourdieu says, this *is reasonable without being rational*. This is what

allows a construction of common sense and a non (permanently) conflicting inter-subjectivity: a real world shared materially and symbolically.

A world composed of symbolic systems can be described as a *symbolic environment*, which corresponds, in homology, to the physical environment, both exerting mutual and reciprocal influence. The existence of a symbolic environment implies the possibility of thinking about a Symbolic Environment Ecology, that is, in the relationships between the constituent symbolic elements of the environment, which can be balanced or not, to some degree. We can infer that homologues problems occur in both dimensions: we can think of an eco-symbolic crisis, in which elements that constitute a symbolic environment are threatened, for example, with extinction.

When eco-symbolic imbalances occur, there will be social forces that will look for ways to re-establish or expand the level of harmony (through psychic or physical effects); or there will be deleterious psychic effects on those who have to subject themselves to the divergent and disharmonious forces. The human psychic condition implies seeking a higher level of balance, so that the symbolic forces are in accordance with the cognitive structures.

We then arrived at a **first approach to the concept of Symbolic Sustainability**: it consists in a lasting harmony between the various symbolic systems co-present in a given symbolic environment. As human well-being depends on a (relative) harmonization between the symbolic systems that make up a material/built environment and are manifest in it, the disharmony and tensions resulting from the presence of conflicting/competing symbolic systems mean low symbolic sustainability; greater harmony between co-present systems means greater symbolic sustainability.

4 - Proposals for practical application

From this definition, although partial and provisional, we can resort to some practical cases, to exemplify the possible usefulness of the concept. It is worth noting that the theoretical nature of the concept does not mean that it is devoid of political connotations (in the broad sense), that is, it is a symbolic tool, which can be used in the establishment of relationships, positions and in symbolic disputes in general.

Quite broadly, we will refer first to the insertion of Modernist buildings in pre-existing environments (figure 1). Since modern architecture is based on some elementary and permanent principles - absence or restriction of ornaments, of historical references and of elements of Nature - we can assert that this type of architecture imposes a disruptive symbolic system, which logic contradicts the bases of human cognitive - and therefore, symbolic - formation. In this way, the insertion of modern architecture implies symbolic disharmony - unsustainability. It doesn't matter if the followers of modernism consider their buildings beautiful (which is possible), the symbolic system employed cannot be harmonized with the multi-millenary history of human cognitive formation, nor with its natural bases (and, of course, neither with tradition). Thus, the application of the concept can serve as a tool to change the debate, to the detriment of the relativist arguments of the modernists.

Figure 1: Venice, IUAV gate. Photo by the author.

In a more specific case, we address the issue of large cruise ships in Venice lagoon (figure 2). This is a difficult issue to solve, since the arguments of those who are against the presence of these ships (the disproportion of scale between the boats and the city, the pollution of the lagoon, even the ugliness of the ships - essentially arguments related to *material* aspects) are simply put

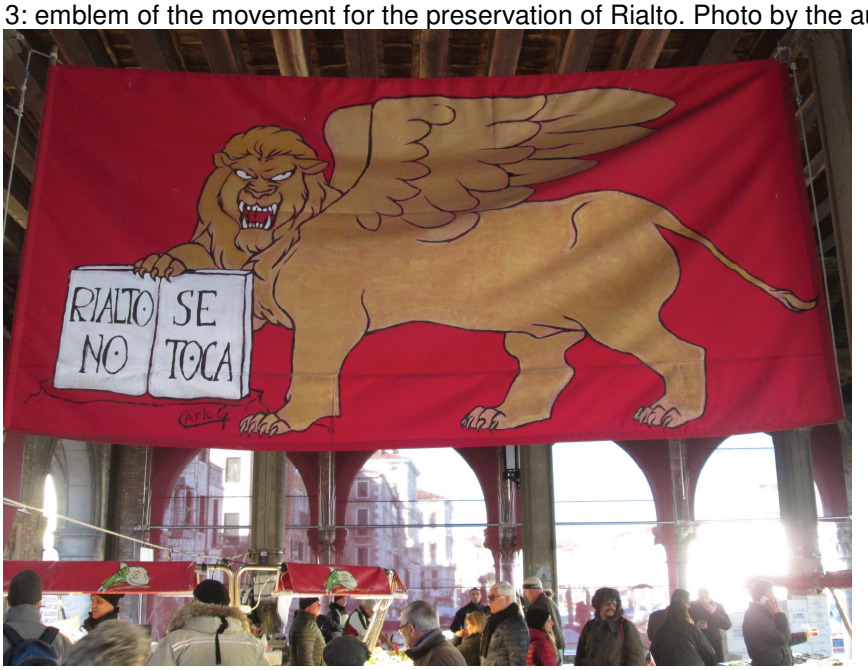
against to other arguments, basic but inescapable - income from tourism, 'progress', 'modernity'.

Here, too, the concept of symbolic sustainability can contribute in combating these monstrosities: it results a symbolic aggression, the insertion of a symbolic system that is incompatible with the traditional and dominant (because valued and maintained) symbolic systems in the city. The destruction of the traditional symbolic systems is the destruction of the city itself and of the raison d'être of tourism.

Figure 2: Cruise ship in Venice. Photo by the author.

In the same way, a movement like the one that defends the preservation of the *Mercato di Rialto* (figure 3) may have its arguments reinforced with the use of the Symbolic Sustainability concept, since the material and rationalist elements are not enough to counter the logic of the modernizers, themselves firmly based on material, especially economic, arguments.

Figure 3: emblem of the movement for the preservation of Rialto. Photo by the author.



5 – Conclusion

Despite many claims about the end of Modernism, both by its defenders and intellectual heirs and by analysts who see adaptive transformations in the style as signs of its termination, we can say that Modern Architecture remains the world dominant model (FAZION, 2019). In fact, modernists knew how to operate transformations and adaptations both in their buildings and in their discourses, in order to maintain an aura of 'modernity' and even 'avant-garde', while, in fact, they continue to produce according to the same principles launched more than a century ago.

Having the modernists, throughout the 20th century, managed to impose their interpretation and their political vision as universally accepted principles - at least by those who hold symbolic power – they thus achieved making symbolic disputes totally asymmetric, conquering for themselves not only central positions in the Field, but also the legitimacy to establish the discourse of the *doxa*.

In this way, it has become increasingly difficult to combat modernist hegemony (FAZION, 2017), with the opponents' arguments being reduced, a priori, to the role of symbolic subordinates who, even though they can count in their favor the fact that they are based on 'logical' or 'historical' principles, etc.,

they are maintained, by virtue of their underprivileged positions in the Field, devoid of legitimacy and, consequently, of symbolic strength and transformative power.

Therefore, it is necessary to build a new discursive framework, which can use symbolic tools different from the traditional ones to advance positions in the Field. In this context, arises the proposal to use the concept of Symbolic Sustainability, which has its bases on anthropological and historical notions, but also symbolically penetrates the Field of Ecology and opposes the spheres of materialism, scientism and Positivist thinking, establishing a new parameter for the cultural and symbolic assessment of environments, hitherto absent from public debate.

With some basic examples of application, we hope to have demonstrated the potential of this theoretical proposal, with the objective not only of presenting the concept but also of raising the debate in search of its deepening and consolidation.

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[2] The works of Frampton (2000), Portoghesi (1991) and Venturi (2004) can be taken as examples.

[3] The importance of a work like that of Tom Wolfe in 'From Bauhaus to our house', from 1981, is not negligible, which helps to explain the many negative criticisms that the book received from architects (STEVENS, 2003).

[4] See BOURDIEU (2007: 169).

[5] See JAMES (2014)

[6] Although Guattari (1990) have made, a long time ago, a proposition to expand the concept of Ecology, little has been done to date to meet his call for 'three Ecologies'.

[7] See, for example, MINGUZZI (2008).

[8] A very clear example is in 'Ecological Urbanism' (MOSTAFAVI and DOHERTY, 2014). This book brings the type of discourse adjusted to appease the consciences of those who are 'concerned' with the 'ecological crisis' (never perfectly defined), who intend to be 'up-to-date' with the most current themes, with a few hints utopia or even delusional.

[9] Roger ULRICH's (1979; 1984; 2006) works are quite illuminating regarding the influence of forms on human beings.

[10] Papanek (1995) and Salíngaros (2008), for example, point to several of these characteristics.

[11] Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Koffka noticed that 'a landscape can appear sad even if personally we are completely happy' (KOFFA, 1935), that is, there are objective elements in this type of interpretation.

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